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THE MYTH OF THE DEITY OF JESUS

A SERMON

BY

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THE MYTH OF THE DEITY OF JESUS.

BIBLE-LESSON, II COR. IV. AND V.

Text—II. Cor. v., 19. In this passage St. Paul, carefully describing the mission to which he felt he had been called, writes as follows :

"All things are of God, who reconciled me to himself through Christ, and gave to me the ministry of reconciliation ; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself."

[I ask you to note that this critical summary of the relation of God and Christ, and of the aim and issue of the mission of Christ, by the chief founder of organized Christianity, contains no suggestion of the deity of Jesus, but is wholly consistent with the view of his normal humanity ; while it expressly contradicts, in terms, the theory of the vicarious atonement by Christ, as it has been preached throughout Christian history, although it appears now to be slowly yielding to the true conception which Paul expresses.

God is in every holy soul of man. And He has needed never to be reconciled to men, but has forever sought, and seeks, to reconcile men to himself.

These are among the *most characteristic* principles of true Christianity.]

One of the most important observations of modern historical science is that of the extent, nature and function of the *mythical* element in our traditions and records of past times. There is a difference between myths and legends, not always readily discriminated, but it is not of importance to me at this moment. It seems to be chiefly this : that such a story as we call a myth embodies in historical form some *idea* ; some longing or aspiration of men's hearts ; some fear or horror ; often some great *truth*.

A mere story, without such a core of suggestion ; a local tradition of wonder or dread ; a fairy tale ; a ghost story, the product of mere fancy, we call a legend. It is the element of idea, of embodied or symbolized truth, of unconscious purpose, that raises a tale to the dignity of a myth.

Rev. Dr. Hedge defined a myth thus : " I call any story a myth which, for good reasons, is not to be taken historically, and yet is not a wilful fabrication with intent to deceive, but the natural growth of wonder or tradition, or a product of the Spirit uttering itself in narrative form."

Myths, then, are honest, even if unfounded. They may convey, and have conveyed, important truth. They may grow up in any age, even in the present, although more naturally in periods of undeveloped intellect and of crude science.

Professor Carpenter, in his recent highly valuable essay on "The Relation of Jesus to his Age and Our Own," gives an interesting account of a remarkable myth which has spread through India within half a century, and closely resembles much of the mythology which has attached itself to the person of Jesus.*

As myth is really an effort to express idea or truth in historical form, it has been natural that it should peculiarly accompany the development of *religion*. All religions have had their element of myth. Christianity is eminent, if not pre-eminent, among the world-religions in this respect. Orthodox Christianity, as preached about us at this present moment, is a marvellous *mythology*. Its central doctrine is in the strictest sense a pure myth, and there could be no more accurate or remarkable example of one. Around this, cluster derivative and incidental stories, also strictly mythical,—such as the miraculous birth; the miraculous acts; and the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus,—all accepted in Protestantism. In Roman Catholicism there are an infinite number more; from that of the immaculate conception of the Virgin to the apparition of the Madonna of Lourdes. The day of miracle has never ceased for the Catholic Church.

* Story of "The Bab,"—*i.e.*, The Gate, or forerunner. He came to believe himself the "Qa'im," the promised deliverer, "he who is to arise." "Around his figure there shone such a majesty that even unbelievers bowed in lowly awe. He healed the sick, effecting cures even at a distance; he was transfigured before two of his disciples; he converted his guards; and foretold his own death" by martyrdom. He was put to death in 1850, "maintaining to the last a lofty and unsullied spirit." His followers are estimated at nearly a million, of all castes. See "The New History of The Bab," 1893.

The central doctrine of orthodox Christianity, as I have called it, is that of the deity of Jesus. I have heretofore examined it, at length, before you,* and shall now refer only passingly to its origin and development.

This great myth is an attempt of the yearning heart of humanity to assure itself of the goodness of God and to bring Him near to its imagination. The truth which it symbolizes is that of the community of nature in God and man; His benevolence towards men; His constant presence among them. Unsatisfied, as the undeveloped spiritual nature is apt to be, with its own intuitions, impatient for clearer light, surer convictions, it turns to the intellect for assurances from without itself. It looks for God in the physical order, and if any strange event occurs there, interprets it as miracle, and sees Him peculiarly in it. It is prone to accept any suggestion which may arise in its own imaginings, or from other minds, or from outward events, of manifestations of Deity in the operations of the material universe, or in the persons and acts of remarkable men. It inclines to believe such things, because they seem to help it. They give it a comfort, a certainty, which it craves, but cannot easily attain otherwise. Observe that this comfort and certainty are intellectual, not spiritual. They are not "of faith."

Thus arose the whole pantheon of India, Egypt, Greece and Rome; the great array of gods and goddesses, of demi-gods, fauns, dryads and the rest. Thus Jesus was lifted from the category of humanity and, as happened to many of the heroes of classical times, was identified with Deity. It was a distinct instance of what the classics called *apotheosis*,—elevation to godhead. The Roman Emperors were worshipped, in all sincerity and fervor, during their lifetime. The Russian Tzar is almost equally deified and worshipped by the simple peasants of the interior of his realm to-day. So also are the Emperors of China and Japan. Conceive the brutishness of

* Sermon published January 8th, 1893, "The Strict and Normal Humanity of Jesus." See also "The Myth of the Resurrection of Jesus," April 9, 1893.

the rural population of the Roman Empire, or of these modern empires, and consider the sentiments which a man like Alexander or Napoleon is capable of evoking, and the possibility of men's believing in the deity of an all-potent monarch, or in such a doctrine as that of the deity of Jesus, becomes very clear.

Of course, this latter myth was not developed in a day. While its germination may be earlier traced, it took some centuries to establish it fully in the creed of the church. The first step was the differentiation of Jesus as a sort of glorified man. This was possible to the Hebrews, who, exquisitely jealous of the sole majesty of god-head, could never have taken the last step. But to the Hebrews, the idea of inspired prophets was familiar for centuries, and likewise of peculiarly commissioned servants of Jehovah, leaders of the people, like Moses and Joshua. Later, the expectation of the Messiah became general and eager. Jesus's disciples began soon to speculate as to whether he were not the Messiah, or Christ. Some of his followers had thought him John Baptist come again, or perhaps Elijah, or Isaiah. It is possibly the case that Jesus came to think of himself, sometimes, as realizing the Messianic hope. This is not hastily to be admitted on such evidence as exists. Yet it would not have been strange, under the circumstances in which he was, although it appears, at first, hardly accordant with the greatness of his mind, or the simplicity and purity of his aims, and the spiritual elevation of his most authentic thought.

But it is not necessarily incompatible with these. Even the greatest minds have their different sides and their varying moods. At least, if Jesus ever, in thought, accepted the Messiahship, he highly spiritualized it.

Judaism could never advance much beyond this point, illustrated especially by the view which Paul entertained about Jesus,—as a glorified man, the spiritual Messiah.

Yet even in Judaism was the germ of the idea, which, much more distinct in Greek philosophy, contributed *chiefly* to the final exaltation of the Hebrew Teacher to personal identity with the Deity. This was that some-

what weird notion of an emanation—in theological parlance, an “hypostasis”—from the Deity, as the efficient agent of his will, which appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, though without prominence there, as the “Wisdom” of God; perhaps, sometimes, “the Word of the Lord;” which in Greek was called by a term which means “word”—(and something more—the uttered, efficient wisdom and will of God)—the Logos.

Christianity, as you know, early migrated from the land of its birth, pursued its growth in Gentile lands and became deeply permeated with Gentile influences. On pagan soil, there was no obstacle to the development of such a myth as that of the deity of Jesus; and this familiar doctrine of the Logos, encountered by a faith which held up the glorified man of St. Paul,—the idea of the Messiah of Judaism, expanded to that of the Christ of all humanity,—easily led up to the complete identification of Jesus with godhead.

To this we may add, as a contributing cause, the influence of the Roman popular religion, in which such an idea as the deity of a great man was, as I have said, most familiar and attractive.

Thus, most hastily sketched, arose this gigantic myth; which still holds the mind of almost all Christendom in its grasp; which moulds the piety and inspires the worship of the most enlightened nations. I think no other world-religion affords an instance of one so elaborate, so literally held,—or so audacious.

Before I pass on, let me note a qualified form in which the myth is often presented. One of the most influential sentences in the New Testament has been that in the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of our Fourth Gospel: “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but should inherit eternal life.” This and equivalent texts are found chiefly, if not exclusively, in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles. They represent, not the final, but a *secondary* stage in Christian thought, in which the elevation of Jesus above normal manhood has proceeded a good way. Not one of them was intended to convey

the idea of his *deity*. But the *intermediate* position they suggest,—between the natural theism which Jesus taught, and the bold conception of God himself appearing on earth in human form,—seems easier to occupy, and is more acceptable to many minds, who half reluct at the latter, or find it even less attractive than this. It seems to suggest a *condescension* on the part of Deity, which is accepted on a proof of his love. “He that spared not his own Son,” cries Paul, “shall he not, with him, freely give us all things?” I do not now further refer to this class of texts, for I wish to consider, of the whole doctrine of the deity of Jesus, what its effect has been, and is.

That the presence of Christianity in the world, even including this gigantic myth, has been of inestimable importance, who could even remotely question? That even the conception of Jesus’s deity, in itself, has served most important purposes, no student of religion will question. That the success of the Athanasian party at the Council of Nicæa, in A.D., 325, was on the whole more fortunate for the world than the triumph of the Arian party would have been, is conceded, I think generally, by Unitarian theologians of to-day. Under the conditions of thought in the fourth century, it probably saved to the world the inestimable conviction of the identity of the divine and human substance on which all effective religion rests. It kept God near to man through dark and dubious ages.

So, through later Christian history, this service of keeping God near to man, which, in its way, this doctrine has performed, has been of incalculable importance. It is this indispensable truth of the divine *nearness* which the myth embodies, and which makes it precious.

On the other hand, the exquisite traits of Jesus’s character, attributed to Deity, have kept lovely and attractive that divine countenance which the fears of men have often made dreadful, and even repellant. Sorrowful, sinful hearts have dared to worship a God who, in his human character, loved little children, and even the flowers of the field and the birds of the air; could pity

the repentant harlot, and forgive the men who smote him in his last hours. Piety and poetry have woven about this wonderful myth associations past all estimate in extent and variety, and tender, gracious, beautiful past all description. The world was fortunate, indeed, when the conception of godhead was inextricably associated with, and forever illustrated by, the characteristics of the holy and loving soul of Jesus.

Nor has the presentation to the piety of humble minds, of deity in the form of a holy manhood,—even with the limitations of manhood,—been *merely* injurious. The divine Jesus among Protestants has been, like the Virgin among Catholics, a conceivable, loveable, accessible ideal of godhead, and has thus been and is the comfort and stay of innumerable hearts, who would be desolate indeed if it were rudely torn from them, with no higher and truer conception offered in its place.

And yet, at the same time, the continued prevalence of the myth of Jesus's deity has worked profound *injury*, which rises almost to the height of disaster. As inferior coin keeps out of circulation that which is more valuable, so each imperfect religious conception, the more it is satisfying in form, the more it is an obstacle to the perfect truth. By it aspiration is satisfied, and seeks not to rise higher. Yet not only you and I, and the people of our day, are capable of a pure and unmythical conception of God, but if, through the whole past of Christianity, the conception of God which Jesus himself offered to the world had been that on which, unqualified, men's thoughts were bent, which preaching sedulously illustrated, which shaped and inspired prayer, I know not how much higher, purer and nobler the religious condition of men would have been; how much better their moral condition. It is the tragedy of religious history that the world should not—perhaps it could not!—accept the God of Jesus, the loving, holy Father, ever near us, audient of every unbreathed prayer of aspiring or troubled man; watchful of even a sparrow's falling; more ready to forgive than we to ask forgiveness; opening his heart and his stores at the slightest knocking of his child's hand;

from whom, should his child stray, He goes out, like the shepherd over the mountain sides, to seek and to save him. I accept with thankfulness and awe the actual results of religious development, but when I contrast the representation of God and his ways which Jesus offered, with the scholastic subtleties of Christendom's elaborate creeds, I could weep tears of blood that such a conception was hindered, but by a feather's weight or a hair's breath, in making its saving way to the hearts of men.

The evil which the great Christian myth has wrought is this: that, whereas, in its time, it served to bring God *near*, it still more put, and puts, Him *away*. Under the very best conditions of the prevalent Christian faith, the infinite, ever-present, loving Father is hidden by the Son. The loving soul which addresses its prayers to Jesus as God, is satisfied not to rise to the all-perfect spiritual deity to whom he himself turned in the daily needs of his spirit and the crisis of his agitated life. The whole conception of godhead has been *limited*, and, in being limited, has been *lowered*.* I cannot speak now of the aridity, the jejuneness, the barrenness of the scholastic theology. Thank God that it is passing away; that the simple worship of Jesus the man, with his pulsating heart of love, his "eye severe" of holy righteousness, is quietly putting it aside. The present effort of the sects, more and more pronounced, to "get back to Jesus," as the phrase is, is very hopeful. But hopeful above all because it may lead, must lead, to contemplation of his surest and highest thought: to the rising of his followers above their present humanized God, to the infinite, perfect, spiritual Father from whom we are derived, in whom we live and move and have our being; the power that sus-

* Since the above was in type, the writer, at a large meeting, heard a prayer addressed, throughout, *exclusively* to Jesus. The word "God" did not occur in it, nor "Father," nor "Spirit," nor was either idea suggested. Its piety was tender and touching, but the obvious limitation of the worshipper's idea of godhead was very painful. The infinite, spiritual Father was replaced by a conception strictly and narrowly humanized. One could hardly imagine an act more trying to Jesus himself (who would not even allow himself to be called "good") than the ascription to him of such a prayer. (Mark x., 17.)

tains the Universe ; that makes everywhere for righteousness ; that works in every human heart and life, nearer to us than we are to ourselves ; our all-holy, all-sufficient, accessible, tender Friend, who loves us better than we love ourselves, and only waits to bless us.

The continued acceptance of an ideal of God *not the highest*, holds down all our ideals. The Sicilian brigands, before they depart on a marauding raid, fail not to visit their churches, and invoke from their chosen saints the protection and furtherance they require. Such are those saints, as their devotees conceive them, that they do not rebuke the sacrilege nor restrain from the crime. So great Christian nations hesitate not, with no uprisings of contrite sorrow, to praise and thank God for the awful victories of their armies, the slaughter and pillage of their fellow-men—His equal children. Again, men's ideals of godhead do not withhold them from an essential impiety. Thus, *humanize too much* your conception of God and it will be possible for you to pray to Him without repentance, and to accept imaginary solace without rectification of character. Witness, the popular worship of the Virgin in Roman Catholic communities—an ideal of loveliness and succor, but not of exacting righteousness. Witness a great deal of the popular worship of Jesus in Protestant lands. The humanized deity is not enough above the worshipper to rebuke his self-interest, his worldliness, his sin. To the man-god it may be possible for the assiduous worshipper to resort, unashamed and uninspired. Before the all-holiness of the loving, almighty, fatherly Spirit, the soul must be insensible indeed that is not abashed, and cold indeed that is not touched to love and tenderness. I have often preached, and I repeat it emphatically, that the influence of the popular theology, with its lowered ideal of God, its imperfect trust in Him, and its provision for vicarious salvation, is, perhaps, the most serious moral obstacle our portion of the human race has encountered and is suffering from.

That *intermediate* doctrine, of which I spoke,—of God's love, manifested to the world by his sending out his Son,—engagingly though it may be stated, really

involves and betrays a deep *doubt* of God, which the faith of Jesus would shame away. It is often frankly affirmed, even, that the evils of life are so great and dark that one cannot trust the goodness of our Father without some such peculiar and miraculous assurance. Is this, my friends, religious *faith*? or is it religious *skepticism*? I hold the doubt of God to be *impiety*; for, if He exists, He *must be* good; it is but one—and the highest—element of his perfection. It is strictly *infidelity* to let any of the facts of life, or all of them, as we see them, abate our trust in God. Who are we,—watching, for an ephemerid's day, with minds of infantile expansion,—to sit in judgment on his world, to assess his acts, to decide that, because his ways are beyond our comprehension, He is not good, and the issues of his evolving scheme of things shall not be good? That very doctrine of the Logos, out of which the myth of the sonship, and finally of the deity of Jesus grew, was actually founded on the false and pagan notion that God, in his selfhood, is too high above and far away from the world to permit Him to act in it, except through an intermediary. How different the thought of Jesus, greatest of religionists and simplest of pietists! "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find. God numbers the very hairs of your heads! Behold the birds of heaven, that neither sow nor reap, yet our heavenly FATHER feedeth them; are not we much better than they? If God clothes the grain of the field, and every shrub and tree, with beauty and grace and utility, shall He not clothe us, his children? Is there a *man* who, when his son asks bread, will give him a stone? If ye, then, being imperfect and sinful, yet love your children, and seek to bless them, shall not the infinite Father of us all love and bless us?"

But, certainly, it is especially of the harm which the myth of the deity of Jesus does, that it puts *himself* away from us. The foundation principle of spiritual religion is the conviction of likeness of nature in the worshipper and the object of his worship. The instinct of a Jesus could not fail to apprehend this fundamental religious verity, and his own consciousness, flowering from the piety

of ages of Hebrew faith, felt and confirmed it. Without argumentation, he assumed and asserted the identity of the divine and human substance and nature, calling God our Father, and urging men to feel themselves his children.

Thus *the divinity of manhood* was the basis of his appeals, correlatively with the fatherhood of godhead. Of this all-precious truth he was himself a noble illustration. To few, if any, of his successors in history has it been permitted to leave on the world the impression of a spirituality so pure and elevated, of a spiritual oneness with God so profound and so entire.

His own most characteristic view in religion forbids us to regard such a man as Jesus as an *exception* to this great primary religious principle. Nor can we afford to surrender such an example of the spiritual and moral capacities of our nature. It was the habit of early times to see, in an exceptionally great man, the features of some god. But this belittled humanity and discouraged emulation. The highest achievements of humanity were surrendered and their suggestions lost. We are not inspired to imitate that which we feel to be of nature different from ourselves. If Jesus was not only, like us all, divine in nature, but actual godhead incarnate in human form, then all the force which his example possesses as an illustration of our natural powers, is sacrificed. It is a beautiful spectacle still, but it adds nothing to the already measureless perfection and beauty which the exalted soul conceives in Deity. Its peculiar force of appeal, as the attainment of normal humanity, vanishes, and we are left without the encouragement of a supreme example of human excellence.

Of course, were the deity of Jesus, in any conceivable way, *demonstrated* as a fact, we should have to accept it, and derive from it the incitements we could, though deprived of one of crucial importance. But it is far from demonstrated. It rests on no proper evidence. It is plainly due to misconception; a myth, arising in an early time, maintained by the conservative force of all once-grounded faiths, and the vested interests of dogmatic

and ecclesiastical systems. It is unspiritual in quality, making the oneness of a holy soul with God the formal identity of personalities. It is a result to which no free enquiry, I can but think, could bring any intelligent mind as to an historical fact.

Actually, I must add, in the habit of orthodox Christian feeling, the sense of the human greatness of Jesus, his wisdom, his force of character, his moral elevation, his spiritual insight, is deeply impaired by the prevalent belief in his deity. Being, from that point of view, only a dramatic exhibition, his career becomes unreal and phantasmal. The powerful appeal which it ought to make to the consciences of men, is blunted and parried. In fact, it is but little thought of, and loses, practically, almost all its force. I speak what I know, my friends. I think you must know this too. Jesus is worshipped as Deity; his actual example is not accepted; his most characteristic principles in religion and morals are not obeyed, or even accepted. And this is largely because of the unreality which the popular theology casts about his person and career.

Even more and worse than this is true: devout worshippers of Jesus as God—seeing in the Incarnation the high purpose of his being—*frankly disparage* the importance and excellence of his actual career and character. Reverent and earnest souls expressly say, “as a man Jesus was not so exceptional; his words are not so different from those of other teachers; his acts have been paralleled by those of many another saint. It is because, in his person, he brings God near to us, because the condescension and love of God were thus peculiarly manifested in him, that we rejoice in him.” So, by a most pitiful inversion of reasoning, the deepest burthen of Jesus’s religious thought is made to destroy the significance of his unique example!

Herein we see exactly the evil which a myth is likely, finally, to do. It may originally symbolize and, as in amber, preserve through unspiritual times, some great spiritual truth. This may be, for a time, a precious

service to mankind. But while mental development proceeds, and men actually become capable of receiving the spiritual truth itself, lo! the symbol has been hardening into a dogma; what was a struggling, unconscious effort to illustrate spiritual truth, has become the bold assertion of outward, historic fact.

Thus, while it may continue sincere, all mythology becomes at last, as accepted, untrue, and, in its effects, misleading. The myth of the deity of Jesus, even in that form of it which, in theology, is described as his "sonship," has both obscured the great truth which Jesus especially and beautifully taught,—of the spiritual identity of the divine and human natures,—and has disparaged the dignity of his actual person and career and impaired the force of his high moral appeal.

To redress this great injustice; to repair these immense losses, is a service of no common importance. Feeble as we may seem to ourselves, it providentially devolves, to the extent of our powers, upon us who recognize it. It is an important part of our duty to the world of our time. I would not have you sectaries. I would have you do intelligent justice to the truth which must almost needs lurk in every doctrine to which the hearts of men have long clung. But I would have you understand the importance of the Unitarian protest; the full significance of the effort to which we are, as a body, addicted. It is no superficial distinction in thought, no merely negative proposition, that we stand to maintain. It is the all-important, fundamental, spiritual truth of the oneness of essential humanity and divinity; making Deity apprehensible, and humanity capable of limitless ascent and perfecting; it is the normality and simplicity of all the relations between God and man, harmonizing all the affirmations of religion with all the expanding inductions of science; it is the significance and infinite hopefulness of the human career; finally, it is the dignity of the man Jesus, the nobility, practicality and commanding exigence of his spiritual thought and ethical principles; it is the exalted loveliness

of his character and career, and their profound suggestiveness as a true and many-sided, but normal, example to all men, his brethren,—all this, my friends, is what we stand for ; all this we ought to understand far better than we do. To this, if we understand and accept it, we ought to give, not mere partisan loyalty, but the devotion of our sincere hearts ; the earnest impulsion of our words, and the significant illustration of our characters and lives.